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Review of *For the Sake of a Child: Love, Safety, and Abuse in our Plain Communities*—Allen Hoover and Jeanette Harder

Trudy Metzger

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Review of: **Hoover, Allen, and Jeanette Harder. 2019. *For the Sake of a Child: Love, Safety, and Abuse in Our Plain Communities*. Stoneboro, PA: Ridgeway Publishing. 128pp., p/b, \$9.99.**

By Trudy Metzger
University of Waterloo

For generations, a silent cry has arisen from within “my people,” the Conservative Anabaptist (CA) community, among whom I grew up: *Who will listen, among us, to the cries and plight of abuse victims?* Whether due to sexual abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, or other failures to protect, victims have long been voiceless. Long, they have gone seemingly unnoticed.

In *For the Sake of a Child: Love, Safety, and Abuse in Our Plain Communities*, Allen Hoover and Dr. Jeanette Harder answer this question with: *We have heard. We will respond.* Writing as an insider, Hoover is an influential Old Order Mennonite who was appointed by church leaders in 2011 to be a contact person for abuse cases in his community. Dr. Jeanette Harder, a social work professor, offers cultural awareness training for child protection agencies in the United States. Together, Hoover and Harder address a broad spectrum of abuse and neglect issues, problems that Hoover admits are present within their community. With cultural sensitivity, they teach their target audience, the CA community, how to respond in situations of abuse and how to take preventative measures. Among topics addressed are blatant abuse, such as molestation – though the word is never used, and references to it are discreet, as is the cultural norm – and harsh spankings administered in anger, as well as matters of neglect that fail to protect children on farms.

For the Sake of a Child is not cumbersome in the use of technical language, thus making it accessible to readers from a broad age range and varied educational backgrounds. To reach a culture that shuns higher education, this is critical. Use of stories is done well throughout, giving readers context for the intended teaching. Thus, readers, who may find more technical language to be burdensome, will benefit from the teachings communicated through story. In Chapter 2, for example, the authors tell of a family whose children were troublesome at school, and the solution was to apply discipline too quickly, thinking this would

bring the erring children back into line. Years later, the father was charged with sexual abuse. Using the story as an example, the authors question whether the children were perhaps crying out for help or for love and needed someone to care for them instead of the discipline they received. They concluded this story with a heart wrenching, “*And no one understood.*” Without saying it in so many words, the authors compel readers to consider the nature of children to act out when their world is filled with injustice and abuse, and they appeal to adults to care for the children rather than to merely correct their behaviour. Gently, they invite the CA culture to consider pitfalls in the overuse of discipline, and name spanking as abuse when meted out in anger. While many in society have chosen to abandon corporal punishment, spankings remain legal in the United States and Canada, with strict guidelines regarding what is acceptable. Spanking continues to be a common practice among CA communities, making this a necessary component of the book. It would be advisable to make readers aware that legal guidelines exist, though they vary from region to region, with consequences if disregarded.

The foreword, by Marvin Wengerd, is thoughtful, and humbly acknowledges failure among Christians to care well for abuse victims. He offers a powerful appeal to the Christian community – Anabaptists in particular – to take action. He writes, “[T]his generation must act. We must offer powerful solutions to help victims process past abuse. No band-aids. No quick fixes.” His message is clear and direct, as he goes on to say, “We must look abuse in the eye and call a spade a spade. We’re done tiptoeing around the feelings of a perpetrator or their families. We’re done acting like all is well when abuse lurks, ready to pounce on yet another innocent victim.” Wengerd effectively removes the onus from the victim and places it squarely on the shoulders of the perpetrator. The responsibility to protect the vulnerable he places on the church. In reference to the law clamping down on sex crimes, he states, “The law of our land awoke us out of yawning apathy into hand-wringing uncertainty. Now, it’s time to move to powerful resolve.” The foreword will encourage survivors in Anabaptist communities to know that there are leaders ‘among us’ who grasp the depth of suffering and what it will take to bring about change.

Wengerd's wish that every child would know "the security of protected purity" is well intentioned. Respectfully, I encourage Christians to replace the word *purity* with *innocence*. To equate sexual abuse with loss of *purity* marks the abused child or adult, causing them to feel isolated, devalued, and certainly unfit within a culture that values purity so highly. On page 27, this resurfaces: "Even in marriage, [victims] find it hard to really trust and love their marriage partner, because the sacredness of the marriage bond has been defiled [...]" I propose that the marriage relationship, while invaded by trauma, is not defiled. It remains pure and sacred. By changing the ill-fitting labels of *impure* and *defiled*, we remove from victims the burden of being damaged goods and offer wholeness, purity, and a secure and confident place to belong within the culture.

Cultural teachings, while not the focus, are woven throughout the book in subtle ways and will connect with readers in the CA culture. Something as simple as encouraging a committee to open a meeting with *silent* prayer, as is the custom among some CA groups, will make readers within the culture, who value these traditions, comfortable with the content, thus giving more weight to the teachings. This makes *For the Sake of a Child* well suited to the target audience and effective in its purpose. This sensitivity creates space for the authors to speak into sexuality, albeit discreetly, in a way that moves beyond cultural norms.

Scriptures and Bible-based quotations are foundational to reading materials within the culture and are used throughout the book. But using verses out of context inadvertently and unnecessarily causes victims distress. For example, on page 27, the authors write, "[The victim's] conscience has been seared, and the concepts of a loving God, and of forgiveness, trust, and close friendships, are almost impossible for them to grasp." Here, I offer that the human conscience is the inner sense of right and wrong and requires deliberate choice to sear it. 1 Timothy 4:2, from where the idea of a seared conscience is taken, makes it clear that this is done through lies and neglecting truth. Victims of horror struggle as a result of sins committed against them, not due to personal choice. They have broken hearts that need to be shown the love of God, gently, with no shame imposed on them.

A broad overview of abuse and neglect is outlined in Chapter 3, giving CAs a better sense of

what constitutes abuse, legally. While a few suggestions are made of signs to watch for in a child, such as anger and change in personality or acting out sexually, more could be offered in the way of recognizing signs of abuse. This was possibly excluded because the book is intended to only skim the surface and be a conversation starter. Even so, given the important nature of recognizing symptoms, for the sake of early intervention and prevention of abuse, more attention to this matter, or directing readers to other sources for more in-depth information, would have been appropriate.

As a professional who has spent over ten years as a mentor, mediator, and advisor to survivors of abuse in CA settings, and being a survivor of the same, the apparent lack of input from victims raises concerns. Nowhere in the book is there any indication that CA victims' feedback was invited or included. This stands out most when the authors repeatedly encourage the community to go to church ministry for help when abuse or neglect is experienced or suspected. In a recent (2019-2020) yet unpublished survey I conducted for *Generations Unleashed*, of 166 CA respondents who are abuse survivors, an average of 70.5% did not recommend going to leaders, citing further emotional and spiritual harm and suffering. Of survey participants, 54% were currently CAs and 46% were past CAs who personally suffered domestic violence, sexual abuse, or both. This indicates a significant gap between the advice given in the book and victims' lived experience. Therefore, to prevent further harm when survivors go to ministers for assistance, we must look at two things: 1. How can victims' voices be taken into account when developing materials targeting their well-being? 2. How can leaders be trained to offer support for victims that provides safety within the community?

Given the book is written for the CA culture, by a CA community member – though with the support of a professional outside of the community – the tone is especially suitable for CA groups and similar cultures. To truly appreciate its value and intended purpose, to gently nudge a reserved culture toward acknowledging and preventing abuse and neglect, it should be read with cultural sensitivity and this target audience in mind, rather than with secular critique. Awareness regarding some of its weaknesses should not discourage victims or others from reading it. This book offers hope that

there are caring and compassionate individuals within CA communities who seek to understand the traumatic experience of abuse survivors. There are leaders and individuals who are willing to take a stand against the evils of abuse, while desiring healing for all. That message is clear and offers much hope to the reader caught in such suffering.

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